

### 2.1.1. David Ohana

#### The Dreyfus Revolution : The Counter-« J'accuse » of the Radical Right

THE DREYFUS AFFAIR was the breeding ground of the modern intellectual. Almost one hundred years ago, on January 14, 1898, Georges Clémenceau, in his paper *L'Aurore*, collectively grouped the authors of the Dreyfusard petition under the headline, « The Intellectual Manifesto »<sup>1</sup>. Although Guy de Maupassant had adopted this term two decades earlier, the heyday of the the intellectuals came only in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair. The intent, of course, was hardly approbatory : Maurice Barrès had contemptuously dismissed the petition as the « Intellectual Protest »<sup>2</sup>. As Anatole France stated<sup>3</sup> :

*By calling us « intellectuals », they sought to denigrate human reason... they raped, ridiculed and abased those with the ability to understand.*

Who is an intellectual ? The historian Yaakov Talmon defined him for me thus :

*It's very simple. An intellection is one who does not sleep at night, and not because of what you think.*

The interesting part of this definition is what it omits : it

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1 Jean-Denis Bredin, *L'Affaire*, Paris, 1983, vol. III, chap. 3.

2 Maurice Barrès, *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme*, « Les intellectuels en logiciens de l'absolu », Felix Guven, 1902, p. 40.

3 Bredin, op. cit.

disregards the widespread assumption that the intellectual is the champion of universal values ; nor is he a watchdog of truth and justice.

Rather, this is a completely neutral definition : some intellectuals are kept awake at night by the nightmare of the violation of human rights ; others spend nights weaving warped illusions of human technology and the yen for power. Insomnia may be caused by the fear of tyranny but also by the awe of freedom.

The assumption that intellectuals are the keepers of the gate of universal concepts (reason), and values (morals) is also the basis of their vilification — from Julien Benda, in his book, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* to Raymond Aron, in his book, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, to contemporary philosophers who have rejected the legacy of enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

There remains the question, however : Is enlightenment necessarily coincident with modernism ? Are today's intellectuals necessarily enlightened ? The first modern intellectual thought not. In his pioneer article of 1750, awarded by the Dijon Academy, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, running completely counter to expectations of the time, contended that science, art and education lay waste to morals.<sup>5</sup> Criticism of the concept of « progress », the jewel in the crown of modernism, kept time from the very first with enlightenment, and Rousseau is a clear example of this.

Modernism is a chronological marker of the period extending from the end of the French Revolution to today ; its significance is consciousness, the daring and ability of humankind in the new era to design its own fate by self-determination. Enlightenment, by contrast, is the world view that advocates the universalization of humankind. Therefore, modernism cannot be equated with enlightenment : there are modern intellectuals who carry on the legacy of enlightenment, and there are modern intellectuals who see enlightenment as an object of scorn ; there are those who use their rationality to build an enlightened world wherein reason is a means for achieving freedom and welfare for

4 Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs*, Paris 1928 ; Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, New York 1962.

5 J.-J. Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, in J.-J. Rousseau, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris 1964.

all, and there are those whose rationality is so extreme it becomes irrational ; and there are those who fight against rationality itself and its pretensions at building a world of reason in every respect.

The common denominator of all intellectuals is the quest that has nourished them from time immemorial to engender, in their heated imaginations, a world or a model of a world. This is the aspiration that stands at the base of modernism, and it ramifies into a worthy, humane and reasoned vision of enlightenment, and a battle against it. No wonder that Zola concludes « J'accuse » with the wish<sup>6</sup> :

*Only one desire do I have, a lust for light, for the sake of those who have suffered such terrible torments and have the right to attain happiness.*

In contrast to the classic philosopher who sought to personify the owl of Minerva, goddess of wisdom, which appears only in darkness, at the end of the day and at the close of the course of history, which sees events only in retrospect or from its ivory tower in order to maintain a neutral stance, the modern intellectual may be found in the eye of the storm — or even running before it. He himself affects to create the myth that lies at the foundation of every living culture ; therefore, the political experience is central for him.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to trace the stands taken on the Dreyfus Affair by the French thinker on the theory of violence and sociology of myth, Georges Sorel, who did a complete about-face during the course of the event, from support of the Dreyfusards to fierce opposition to everything they stood for. In his work *La Révolution Dreyfussienne* (1910), Sorel denote messianic might of the intellectuals whom he saw after the Affair as distorters of reality who conure up illusions of utopias and then, in order to fulfill them, frenziedly pursue the need for power.<sup>8</sup>

Georges Sorel was born in Cherbourg in 1847 to a bourgeois Catholic family. Living at the crossroads of two

6 Mathieu Dreyfus, *L'Affaire telle que je l'ai vécue*, Paris 1978, p. 125.

7 David Ohana, « The "Anti-Intellectual" Intellectuals as Political Mythmakers », in Z. Sternhell (ed.), *The Intellectual Revolt against Liberal Democracy 1870-1945*, The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Jerusalem 1996, p. 87-104.

8 Georges Sorel, *La Révolution dreyfussienne*, Paris 1988.

stormy centuries, Sorel was a participant-observer in the contradictions of the time which presaged the conflicts Europe was soon to experience in reality, and he formulated a radical political style appropriate to the period. He witnessed the changing world first as a civil service road and bridge engineer in the course of his travels in France, Corsica, Spain, Portugal and Algeria; then as a data gatherer in the Perpignan municipal library upon his early retirement at the age of 45; and finally as a culture critic, political sociologist and political philosopher, living in Boulogne-sur-Seine close to events in Paris, where he remained until his death in 1922.<sup>9</sup>

As a young man, Sorel witnessed the rise of Napoleon III and the « spring of nations » and his fall at the hands of Bismarck. He observed the suppression of the Paris Commune and the resulting birth of political groups, workers' organizations, and avant-garde journals that sprang up like mushrooms and played an important role in the French political arena. He followed the development of Marxism, with the frequent crises and revisions designed to either improve or eradicate it. He watched the advent of nationalism; witnessed the modernization and aestheticization of politics manifested in the giant demonstrations and dissemination of daily newspapers during the Dreyfus and Boulanger affairs; was silent when the cannons roared during World War I; and excitedly followed the rise of the Black Shirts in Italy and the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. These turn-of-the-century conflicts were to become the political tensions of the twentieth century: republicanism versus direct action; pluralism versus messianic ideologies; religious tolerance versus anti-Semitism; and open societies closing themselves off into elites out of fear of the masses.

The sole political act taken by Sorel in his lifetime — and he regretted even this — was to sign the January 19, 1898 petition for Dreyfus's retrial.<sup>10</sup> His name appears among the first intellectuals — 36 socialist representatives declaring the

9 David Ohana, « Georges Sorel and the Rise of Political Myth », *History of European Ideas*, XII, no. 4 (1991), p. 733-746.

10 Richard Vernon, *Commitment and Change: Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution*, Toronto 1978, p. 4.

Dreyfus Affair a civil war within the bourgeoisie.<sup>11</sup> This was a drastic change from his earlier stand opposing class cooperation. He also took part in Jules Guesde's manifesto of July 24, 1899 which claimed that the three words, « homeland, right and justice », have no meaning in capitalist society.<sup>12</sup> That same year, in his introduction to the French translation of Saverio Merlino's book, *Formes et essences du socialisme*, Sorel urged the workers to make common cause with the Dreyfusards.

He believed Dreyfus's sentence and the fate of socialism were bound by a single moral issue associated with Nietzsche<sup>13</sup>:

*Socialism is a moral question in the sense that it brings to the world a new manner of judging all human acts and, to employ Nietzsche's celebrated term, a new evaluation of all values.*

Over the next decade, Sorel radically changed his opinion about the Dreyfus Affair and became a bitter enemy of the Dreyfusards, whom he had begun to regard as the embodiment of the ills of society. In his 1911 critique of Daniel Halevy's study of the Dreyfus Affair, Sorel angrily attacked the intellectuals, among them his friend Halevy, on this issue, calling them « parasites of politics » because they had cleared the path for the Dreyfus revolution and were its sole beneficiaries.<sup>14</sup> His words hold none of the disappointment voiced by Julien Benda, for example, who raged about the treason of the intellectuals. Sorel saw them from the beginning as a forceful clique that was building an elitist career alienated from the downtrodden of the world.

Sorel and his circle converted the image of the intellectual as defender of universal morals and reason into a selective perception of the intellectual as mythmaker. The importance of these « anti-intellectual intellectuals » lay in their creation of a modern political mythology, a new terminology of modernism,

11 René Johannet, *Itinéraires d'intellectuels*, Paris 1921, p. 174.

12 J. J. Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians*, Berkeley 1980, p. 14.

13 Georges Sorel, « Préface », in: Saverio Merlino, *Formes et essence du socialisme*, Paris 1898, p. xiii.

14 Georges Sorel, « Trois problèmes », *Indépendance*, 2 (December 1 and 15, 1911), p. 221-240, 261-279.



in which political aesthetics were placed center stage. Sorel mandated a new political culture centered around a political myth that led people to experience politics as theater. From this aspect, Dreyfus the « man » or « justice » was more the marionette in this drama than its major character.

Both J. H. Meisel<sup>15</sup> and Georges Goriely considered the Dreyfus Affair as the « one real event » in Sorel's life<sup>16</sup> which had the greatest impact on his intellectual development. In keeping with the socialist moralism he formulated, Sorel contended that the proletariat cannot remain passive agents of history and it was incumbent upon them to fight for the emancipation of the wretched. He believed the proletariat was the « only soldier », always armed, capable of defending truth and justice. The Dreyfus Affair explains the stunning change in the tone, style and content of Sorel's writings from Marxist reformist in the 1880's to virulent opponent of republican politics in the post-Dreyfus period.

In his reply of August 10, 1899 to Hubert Lagardelle, who had invited him to write for the *Mouvement socialiste*, Sorel admits that he is at a loss so far as the Dreyfus Affair is concerned.<sup>17</sup> All he sees is that the government is showing no tendency to gaher evidence. With regard to the generals, he is convinced they were responsible for what he considers an erroneous judgement and perversion of justice, even though they were not really totally at fault. « One needs to be familiar with the unique tradition of the French military in order not to be at all surprised by it », he explains. The General Staff would lose face were Dreyfus to be exonerated. The twenty years Sorel spent in the service of the bureaucracy as a road and bridge engineer had made him sensitive to the special codes of the military. He believed the anti-Dreyfusard movement harbored the risk of imperialism, the alliance of all anti-republican institutions — the Catholic priesthood, anti-Semites, monarchists, Boulangist schools, and the high-rank military. Sorel

15 J. H. Meisel, *The Genesis of Georges Sorel*, Ann Arbor 1951.

16 Georges Goriely, *Le Pluralisme dramatique de Georges Sorel*, Paris 1962, p. 26.

17 Uberto Lagardelle, ed., « Lettre de Giorgio Sorel a Uberto Lagardelle », *Educazione fascista*, [August 10 and 15, 1898] 1993, p. 239-243.

refers to other historical episodes of injustice, and concludes his letter with an acceptance of the sentence : « It is abomination ; but what can we do ? »<sup>18</sup>

The socialists' controversy on whether to interfere in the Dreyfus Affair convinced Sorel of the irrelevance of abstract socialist theory. The Guesdists (Marxist workers under Jules Guesde) believed that if they would come out in support of the Dreyfusards, they would not be able to justify Marxism as a science. Their opposition was based on the fact that the class war was not the issue at hand ; socialism must be based on practical action, and the first duty of socialism is to defend the Republic. In his early years, Sorel had great sympathies toward Jean Jaurès because of his stand on Dreyfus's sentence and his efforts to gain the support the working class on this issue.

Thus, the questions surrounding Marxist revision and the struggle to obtain a new trial for Dreyfus became interchangeable for Sorel. The « Marxist crisis » had been looming in the background since it had been officially declared by Bernstein.<sup>19</sup> Sorel now directed his efforts to presenting Bernsteinian socialism from the Dreyfusard point of view. In a series of works he began to defend ethical socialism while rejecting the catastrophic concepts of orthodox Marxism. This gauntlet raised by Sorel against Guesde in France was mirrored by Croce against Labriola in Italy and by Bernstein against Kautsky in Germany.

Sorel joined the staff of the *Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales* and the « Adult Education Center » established by the Dreyfusards. In a succession of lectures at the college, in articles for Lagardelle's paper, and in his introduction to Merlino's book *Rivista critica del socialismo*, Sorel raised doubts about the orthodox concept of war of the classes. He claimed it was in essence a battle between the newly arising ethics and the old legal forms. At the heart of this war was a struggle between defenders of the law and defenders of morality. Regarding the Allemanists (the socialist group led by Jean Allemane), who now supported the Dreyfusards, Sorel had this to say : « This was the only group for whom the ethical ideology did not lose in

18 Meisel, op. cit., p. 75.

19 Sorel, « La crisi del socialismo scientifico », *Critica sociale*, VIII, 9 (1 mai, 1898), p. 134-138.

importance ».<sup>20</sup> The emphasis that Jaurès and the integralists placed on ethical action prompted Sorel to support them: « Jaurès is the supreme proof that there is a socialist ethic ». Very soon his stand would switch from one extreme to the other.

In addition to orthodox socialism, Sorel began to attack the Orthodox Church. Socialism, in his view, was a movement of « producers » while the people of the church were the « consumers ».<sup>21</sup> Sorel wasn't concerned with its specific elements or underlying nature *per se*, but rather with the powers that impel the individual and society as the new standards which diverged from the traditional distinction between right and wrong. Sorel projected these standards onto the political arena to enhance Proudhon's contrast between the « morals of the producers » and « the morals of the consumers ». This Proudhonist dualism corresponded, in Sorel's opinion, to Nietzsche's dualism of decadence *vs.* authenticity. Sorel, by equating consumerism with decadence and production with authenticity, incorporated Proudhon's and Nietzsche's philosophies into a new morality built on the ruins of the old one. In this respect, Sorel is indeed considered a moralist, although he endows the concept with a revolutionary cast by going beyond content (moral or political) to aesthetic form. Thus, it was not the « what » of the content of Jewish-Christian morality that was important but the « how » of the desire for power that classifies people by quality.

Like Nietzsche, Sorel embraced the ideal of a productive society and rejected outright a life of decadence. This implies, however, a new assumption of morality adapted from concepts of absolute justice and normative perceptions of good and evil to concepts of production, effort and struggle. In his introduction to the book of the well-known syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier (1902), Sorel condemned the Dreyfusard's exploitation of their position of power using the same immoral egotism they themselves denounced. He differentiates between citizens and workers as follows: « the citizen is an abstraction of the 1800's, whereas the worker is the instrument propelled by the historical conditions of capitalism. » The new morality, that is, of the

20 Sorel, « The Ethics of Socialism », in J. L. Stanley, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, N. Y. 1976, p. 110.

21 Sorel, « Il vangelo, la chiesa e il socialismo », *Rivista critica del Socialismo*, 1 (April-May 1899), p. 295-304.

producers or workers, which represents authenticity and a heroic perception of life, will serve as the foundation of the new civilization centered around the worker.<sup>22</sup>

Sorel's choice of colleagues in the leftist camp in France support the principle he had set for himself: who is to stand up for these vital, militant and ethical values. In October 1899 a meeting was held between Guesde, Brousse, Jaurès, Briand, Viviani and Millerand wherein it was decided to establish a socialist circle. For Sorel, this meeting symbolized the victory of the Blanquist over the Proudhonist school and constituted another stage in his conviction that political parties had ceased to wave the banner of socialist action.<sup>23</sup>

After June 22, 1899, Millerand joined the French cabinet – the first socialist who had agreed to accept a position in a nonsocialist government. In his correspondence, Sorel continued to encourage Jaurès in his efforts to defend Dreyfus, and Millerand and his leadership in his struggle to institute worker reforms. He noted that Jaurès and Millerand were being supported by workers who had become disillusioned with theory. The workers are not siding with the university intellectuals who were now signing up for the socialist party. The latter were doing so, Sorel believed, because they reckoned that supporting Dreyfus and socialism would pay off electorally.<sup>24</sup>

Ten years before, in 1889, Sorel had published his first book, *Le Procès de Socrate*. It is fascinating to compare Sorel's views on the trial of Socrates and his views on the Dreyfus trial which occurred five years after the book came out. In both he recoiled from the politicization of a moral act, from the manipulations of the norm-setters and opportunists, and from the gap between law and justice. Above all Sorel rejected know-it-all intellectuals such as the sophists-rhetoricians. Of these, he considered Plato the most dangerous because he stood for « professional philosophy » — the alleged unity of thought and

22 Sorel, « Preface » in: Fernand Pelloutier, *L'Histoire des bourses du travail*, Paris 1912, p. 27-67.

23 J. L. Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Social and Political Theories of Georges Sorel*, Berkeley 1981, p. 105-130.

24 Sorel, « Socialismo e democrazia: Conclusione sulla faccenda Dreyfus », *Rivista critica del socialismo*, 1 (November-December 1899), p. 874, 965-969.

sector in general, and the intellectuals in particular. In the new order there will be no room for professional intellectuals.<sup>30</sup>

In October 1901, *Les Cahiers de la quinzaine* moved to its historic home on the *rue de la Sorbonne*. Every Thursday Charles Péguy would open the weekly editorial meeting, where intellectuals crowded around « Monsieur Sorel », the eldest of them all. At this point Sorel and Péguy shared the same views on Dreyfus, the Dreyfusards, socialism and democracy. Both rejected the Dreyfusard marriage of anti-clericalism with anti-patriotism. On Friday they walked together to hear the lectures of Henri Bergson at the *Collège de France*. Gradually the subscribers to Péguy's paper — mostly Jews and Dreyfusards — began to drop off because they had lost trust in Péguy and Sorel<sup>31</sup>. By 1901 they had become convinced that Sorel was a reactionary, as evidence by his new ties with Georges Valois and Jean Variot and by his articles in *L'Action Française*. Péguy's new position set off alarms for them: they were suspicious of every possible combination between nationalism and clericalism, and Péguy, they believed, had begun to veer in this direction.

Sorel's response to the flight of the membership was to encourage Péguy to disassociate himself from his Dreyfusard past. It is noteworthy that from 1908 on Sorel took an interest in the « Jewish problem ». He often equated the Jews with his sworn enemies: parliamentary politics, the freemasons, big businessmen, socialist theory and professional intellectuals. He expressed these opinions in his correspondence, articles, conversations. Sorel was not a racist, but like many culture critics of the early twentieth century, his anti-Semitism was based on the view of the Jews as a « messianic » people, who like the men of the Enlightenment, sought by abstract concepts to eradicate French tradition and natural societal dynamics. Jews opposed classical thought and military passions; they supported modernism, rationalism, plutocracy and democracy; they had played an important part in the deterioration of the West into barbarity, Western civilization had been able to gain achievements only when the West managed to free itself for a time from the world in the intellectual Jew. He suggested that France's

30 Edouard Berth, *Les Méfaits des Intellectuels*, Paris 1914.

31 Ardengo Soffici, « Schizzo di Péguy e Sorel », *Ricordi di vita artistica e letteraria*, Florence 1942, p. 325-329.

struggle against the Jews might be equated to America's against the « yellow peril ».<sup>32</sup>

In 1910 Jean Variot began to openly oppose Péguy's dependence on his subscribers. Soon after the appearance of Péguy's essay *Jeanne d'Arc*, Sorel notified Variot that they must « guard Péguy against attacks from his former partners. He has children — the Catholics must form a support group for him. »<sup>33</sup> He suggested the name and financial backing of the very wealthy Conte de Mun. Péguy was shocked to hear of Sorel's proposal and refused to turn his back on his supporters and subscribers. Sorel continued to insist that *Jeanne d'Arc* has pushed Péguy in the nationalist Catholic direction, and he must now choose between the Dreyfusard subscribers and his new orientation.

Péguy's choice only barely satisfied Sorel: it was an attempt to prove that his new patriotism did not contradict his being an old Dreyfusard. In 1910 Daniel Halévy published « Apologie pour notre passé » in his paper — the declaration of a repentant Dreyfusard. This was the same tactic taken by Sorel in *La Révolution Dreyfussienne* that came out the same year. Three months after Halévy's work, Péguy wrote *Notre jeunesse*, which was in a sense an attack on his friends Halévy, Variot and Sorel.<sup>34</sup> All the while, misunderstanding prevailed between Péguy and his Dreyfusard readers. He wrote a poem in praise of the Jews and called himself a republican — not in the governmental sense, but as a way of life. Halévy and Sorel felt that Péguy wrote *Notre jeunesse* to atone for *Jeanne d'Arc* and appease the subscribers.

Between 1908 and 1913, Sorel switched his philosophic and emotional leanings from the socialist to the nationalist camp. In 1908, two years before *La Révolution Dreyfussienne*, Sorel directed his attentions to integral nationalism. At the encouragement of two of his students, Georges Valois and Paul Bourget, Sorel strengthened his ties with *Action Française*. He began to speak of national revitalization as a myth and the « instinct of self-preservation » of groups threatened with extinction. He

32 Sorel, « Urbain Gohier », *L'Indépendance*, II, 21 (1er janvier 1910) p. 305-320.

33 Jean Variot, *Propos de Georges Sorel*, Paris 1935.

34 Charles Péguy, *Notre jeunesse*, Paris 1957.



the bearer of the idea (the proletariat), he turned to a new one (the nation). Thus, the Dreyfus Affair was the test against which to examine the factors that set off Sorel's change in rhetoric.

After 1910 Sorel had reached the stage of total antipathy to republican politics. In his view, the Dreyfusard victory had put the finishing touches on the destruction of traditional France. France had held its own thanks to the old politics, but the Dreyfus Affair had elevated a new class of pitiless shysters, who were much like the opportunists who had surrounded Napoléon III. The Affair had led to a sort of revolution, and like the 1789 revolution, it placed the need to build a new order and to reexamine its positions as its first, burning priority.

The Dreyfus Affair was a crossroads for Sorel: he had always been seeking a vital spirit that would revive French and European civilization — « *ricorso* », to use Vico Giambatista's term — from the warrior-city of Proudhon to ethical socialism to revolutionary syndicalism. In 1898 he had viewed the Dreyfus Affair as a moral ethos that none of the socialists, except Jaurès, had correctly interpreted. The workers were encouraged to support politicians and intellectuals, the pillars of the Dreyfusard movement. Sorel had attacked the church, the military and the anti-Semites who had united against the moral ethos. But from the moment the Dreyfusards won, the picture changed: what had once attracted Sorel to Dreyfus now repelled him.

Sorel formulated his central thesis in *La Révolution Dreyfussienne*. Here he espoused that Dreyfus's « *réhabilitation* » was a political revolution of the Dreyfusards, the intellectuals and the socialists against the nationalists, the Catholics and the military. The turning point occurred when the persecuted Dreyfus became the persecuted right. It was France that was battered, wounded, persecuted<sup>39</sup>:

*Lorsque je parle de la révolution dreyfussienne, je ne veux pas seulement dire que la réhabilitation du capitaine Dreyfus, deux fois condamné par des Conseils de guerre, n'a pu être réalisée qu'à la suite d'un si grand ébranlement de nos traditions, que nous sommes entrés dans une ère nouvelle, qui se distingue par des caractères très marqués, du temps antérieur; c'est là un fait si évident qu'il serait à*

39 Sorel, *La Révolution Dreyfussienne*, op. cit., p. 15.

*peine besoin d'insister sur lui. Les dreyfusards, pour vaincre des forces conservatrices imprévues qui les arrêtaient, ont été obligés de faire appel à des masses populaires qui se plaignaient depuis longtemps de l'ordre établi, pour lesquelles la République avait jusqu'alors plutôt multiplié les condamnations que les réformes et qui finirent par faire pour leurs alliés d'un jour, après avoir intimidé les conservateurs; il a bien fallu essayer d'apaiser ces mécontents par des lois sociales.*

The analogy between the events of the Dreyfus revolution and the earlier revolutions led Sorel to the conclusion that in order to better understand the social situation in France in the first decade of the twentieth century, the events of the past need to be analyzed. Now, he contended that what characterized the dreyfusards was their hypocritical politics which called itself « *social solidarity* », and the stands voiced by its star players — the Guesdists, Jaurès and Millerand — were a farce, not to be taken seriously. In effect <sup>40</sup>:

*Les dreyfusards ont été amenés à faire beaucoup de législation sociale, dans le but d'attacher à leur gouvernement les classes pauvres qui leur inspirent une terreur effroyable. Une nouvelle philosophie a été créée pour persuader aux riches qu'ils ont à remplir un grand devoir social, celui de subir de lourdes charges pour permettre à l'Etat, issu de l'Affaire, de répandre ses bienfaits sur les pauvres. C'est ce qu'on nomme la philosophie de la solidarité; c'est ce qu'il serait plus exact de nommer la philosophie de l'hypocrite lâcheté.*

Thus, the Dreyfus Affair was an invaluable historical test.<sup>41</sup> However, at the time of the event, the right wing representatives did not understand what it was really all about: confused and shaken, they did not heed the implications of their vote. This recklessness led them into a series of erroneous steps that actually advanced the interests of their enemies.

The writers were the most hypocritical of all <sup>42</sup>:

*Les hommes de lettres ne croient pas généralement à la*

40 Ibid., p. 20-21.

41 Ibid., p. 22.

42 Ibid., p. 30.

action in a philosopher-king. Plato, as the archetype of intellectuals, was too oligarchic, too cerebral; a philosopher who constructs an alternative to reality and conjures up illusion; in a word, a Utopian. Sorel believed Socrates was the Father of the intellectual revolution in the Western world and it was he who had caused it to split from heroic, mythic society, thereby paving the way for modern society based on rational premises of progress.<sup>25</sup>

In 1900 Sorel went one step further. His articles at the college, « Préface pour Colajanni » and « La science et la morale », were published in the aftermath of the presidential pardon of Dreyfus in September of that year and reflected his views at the time of the Dreyfusard height of glory.<sup>26</sup> The Dreyfus Affair proved to Sorel that socialism had no choice but to close ranks with other populist movements. He continued to insist that the crucial question regarding socialism was one of ethics. By 1900 Sorel is no longer considered a Marxist socialist; only the name remains. Georges Valois, Sorel's student and the founder of *Le Faisceau*, the first proto-fascist movement in France and in Europe, relates that when he met Sorel in 1900 at the National Library, he admitted to be preparing a treatise on socialism. Sorel told him: « You're wasting your time. Socialism is lost. » Sorel, however, had not abandoned the moral ethos, he merely changed his angle.<sup>27</sup>

For Sorel, the significance of morality was not in its being a categorical imperative, an accepted norm, an ancestral legacy, a socialist platform or a pursuit of justice. In the words of the commentator, R. Humphrey: « For Sorel, moral action is always inherent, or to put in physical terms, it bestows order and creates form. »<sup>28</sup> From this point on Sorel began to take an interest in syndicalist organization, which for him represented moral activity of the highest order. Starting with the ancient heroic civilizations which Sorel had discussed in his early works

25 Sorel, *Le Procès de Socrate*, Paris 1899.

26 Sorel, « Préface pour Colajanni », in: *Matériaux d'une théorie du prolétariat*, Paris 1919, p. 175-200; « La Science et la morale », in *Questions de morale*, Paris 1900, p. 1-25.

27 Georges Valois, *D'un siècle à l'autre*, Paris 1921, p. 135-136.

28 R. Humphrey, *Georges Sorel: Prophet without Honor - A Study in Anti-Intellectualism*, Cambridge, MA 1951, p. 69.

— the early Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and early Christians — and up to Marxist revisionism, Sorel had sought in morality, first and foremost, the heroic, militant ethos which he identified with « life struggle » and « creative energy ».

In his article of 1901, « De l'Eglise et de l'Etat », published in Charles Péguy's journal, *Les Cahiers de la quinzaine*, Sorel is critical of the church because it opposes the retrial of Dreyfus.<sup>29</sup> He calls this anti-Dreyfus policy the church's « grossest error » since 1848. The clergy had incited the resentment and feelings for revenge on the part of the radical Dreyfusards, who in answer to the threat to the Republic from the military camp and the church, had organized for revolt. This Dreyfusard counter-revolution was in effect a « counterchurch », characterized by its own dogma, compatible hierarchy, and maybe even a pope. In the final analysis, it sought to answer the question: Does religion have a future in industrial civilization? Sorel, though critical of the church, was not critical of religion: « I believe Christianity will not disappear. A mystical nature is a substantial element in man, and experience proves that its intensity does not diminish with time. It retains the same power it had before. » He noted that the church had foolishly invested years of diplomatic work for its personal interests, and had again shown itself to be a threat to freedom of thought. Sorel believed this threat to socialism and freedom derived from two sources: the caste of professor-journalists who defended Dreyfus, and the priests who attacked Dreyfus. This « scholastic-political » faction was influenced by the narrow ideas of the 1800's. Thus, the university was in effect anti-church. The higher schools of learning of university management served were hotbeds for the establishment of intellectual elitist power. The Sorbonne was not a place of learning, but a political power post of the bourgeoisie.

Edouard Berth, Sorel's ardent disciple and closest friend, joined him in his anti-intellectual stand. Berth had relinquished his university career because of the Dreyfus Affair, and it was Sorel who convinced him to start anew as a publicist. He began with « Les Méfaits des Intellectuels », a collection of articles published between 1905 and 1908 in *Le Mouvement socialiste*. In them, Berth discusses the role of society's nonproductive

29 Sorel, « De l'Eglise et de l'Etat », *Cahiers de la quinzaine*, 3, no. 3 (1909), p. 4, 29, 55.



believed the deepest self-justification was found in the myths of the national movement. The European nations, including France, had lived for hundreds of years in a permanent state of fear and insecurity, and after a long and brilliant history, France had come to the conclusion that its very existence was in danger. The Franco-Prussian War had been catastrophic, and the Dreyfus Affair in this context was more than a « second Sedan » ; it revived the threat to the existence of the state, the church, and cultural tradition.<sup>35</sup>

French nationalism *à la Sorel* reached its peak with the pact with Catholicism : state and church were allies in the history of France. Catholicism, by its mystic nature — sacrament, miracles, priesthood — gave the believer absolute security. In Péguy's *Jeanne d'Arc*, Sorel was impressed by the combination of fear for the future of France and the mystic foundations of Catholicism. The fear of decadence derived from the belief that alien, aggressive, vulgar institutions were destroying the vitality of the national order. Sorel warned Charles Maurras that the modernists and the intellectuals were the secret enemies of his movement. And the Jews were behind their actions. This alien menace turned into a tangible threat that was manifested in the rise in anti-Semitism. The anti-Semitism was grounded in the profound belief that foreign elements were to be found in high places, and they were demanding emancipation from national tradition. Thus, the messianic myth of Judaism became a fundamental danger to France. These trends had existed before the Dreyfus Affair : Eduard Drumont and his anti-Semitic *Libre Parole* had endowed this general antipathy with an element of real hate. Maurras declared that the « Jewish spirit » threatened the national tradition. Sorel believed that anti-Semitism was now dominant among the French public not because it was a « concept », but because it was an « instinct » : « The French people must defend their homeland, customs and ideas against Jewish infiltrators who seek to control everything. »<sup>36</sup> The Jews would do well to limit themselves to being peaceful tradesmen instead of trying to blaze messianic trails.

The contention of the historian and theoretician S. Hughes that Sorel's « bitterest work », *La Révolution Dreyfussienne*

35 Roth, op. cit., p. 108.

36 Sorel, « Urbain Gohier », op. cit., p. 320.

(1910) is evidence of his disillusionment with Marxism is erroneous for the simple reason that Sorel had never accepted Marxism at face value.<sup>37</sup> His revision was not the product of is disappointment with the political manipulations of the socialists in the Dreyfus Affair. It seems that Edouard Bernstein had accurately defined Sorel's unsystematic socialist theory as « Marxism in Nietzschean dress ». Sorel was never a Marxist in the strict sense of the term, or even a minimalist sense. From the outset he accepted only those Marxist elements that fit his political style, that is, aspiring to heroic myth as the key to rescuing European civilization from its decline. At no stage of his writings did he accept Marx's conclusions, such as the nationalization of the means of production, the historical determinism of economic forces, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the abolition of private property, or Marx's concepts of surplus value, alienation, merchandise fetishism and division of labor. What Sorel emphasized was not the ideological Marxist goal of a classless society, but the war between the classes as a psychological experience to be aspired to ; not understanding the economic mechanism which explains social regularities, but spiritual renewal. In place of Hegel's assumption of the historical dialectic that allows human freedom to unfold in the continual course of progress, Sorel stressed the eternal contradictions *à la Proudhon* and the periodicity of degeneration and renewal *à la Vico* ; he replaced the determinism of socioeconomic forces by the voluntarism constituting the act of self-determination ; while the idea of violence as a new philosophy of history was the last nail he drove into Marx's coffin.<sup>38</sup>

To understand if there's a key to Sorel's shifts in his political aspirations, we must distinguish between the concept or the « idea » and the « bearer of the idea ». Originally, the idea for Sorel was cultural revitalization of Europe, and its bearer, the proletariat. Had there proved to be a positive interrelation between the idea and the bearer of the idea, as Marx had believed, Sorel would have held fast to his Marxist outlook. But as soon as he became aware of the gravity of his error regarding

37 H. S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society : The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*, N. Y. 1958, p. 92.

38 David Ohana, *The Order of the Nihilists : The Birth of a New Political Culture in Europe 1870-1930*, (in Hebrew) Jerusalem 1993.

*valeur propre des idées ; ils n'apprécient que le succès que peut leur procurer l'exploitation d'un parti pris. C'est pourquoi ils sont capables d'adopter des attitudes si imprévues et de troubler ainsi profondément l'ordre public.*

Sorel was furious that the socialists and Dreyfusard republicans had insisted on punishing the church and the army, and he condemned the growing intervention of French socialism in the politics of the Third Republic. He now considered Jaurès the biggest demagogue of all, who was threatening to revert socialism to the ideological degeneration of 1789. In his ridicule of Anatole France, Sorel claimed that France had suddenly discovered a moral streak in Zola<sup>43</sup> ; France had detested Zola's works before the Affair, but after it, he changed his estimation of him.

Zola, Sorel believed, had very well developed instincts for dramatization of issues. To relieve his boredom, he'd pounced on the Affair as if it were some ill-gotten gain. For him, it was a melodrama, a novel in installments. Zola represented the absurdity of the Dreyfusards : he received letters from women admirers who were green with envy of the Jews. He compared Zola to a clown at the fair<sup>44</sup> :

*Zola a été l'homme représentatif de la bouffonnerie de ces temps. Tout le monde est d'accord pour reconnaître que ce personnage encombrant était un très petit esprit ; il aimait à s'entendre appeler poète, psychologue et savant, sans posséder aucune des qualités qui auraient pu justifier en quoi que ce soit aucun de ces titres ; il se donnait comme le chef d'une école réaliste ; mais, en fait, il ne soupçonna jamais ce qui constitue la réalité ; il n'apercevait des choses que de grossiers contours ; c'est pourquoi ses admirateurs disent qu'il a surtout réussi dans la description des foules ; sa prétendue violence était toute verbale ; il excellait dans l'art d'appeler l'attention du public au moyen de grossiers boniments ; on peut le comparer à un clown faisant la parade devant une baraque de foire.*

Sorel's conclusion was also the conclusion of the French radical right : the Dreyfus Affair had ravaged the social struc-

ture of France. The Dreyfusard revolution had abolished the aristocracy and driven France into a social state like that of the Second Empire. The political personages now resembled those that had surrounded Louis Napoléon : Parliamentary rule had become a farce. Sorel returned to the launching point of the Affair's anti-Semitism and asked : Was not the [Dreyfus] Affair, in the final analysis, a result of German treachery ?<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the Dreyfus Affair was a mythic event for Sorel. It was not, to use the term of Claude Lévi-Strauss, a « structure for action » but a « structure of action ». That is, neither in his Dreyfusard stage nor in his anti-Dreyfusard stage did Sorel consider the Affair a framework for taking ideological or moral action ; it was always for him a thing in itself, an integral whole that stood on its own. For what is a myth ? In the words of Sorel, myths are not « descriptions of things, but expressions of need. » Myths should be judged as « means of action in the present. »<sup>46</sup> By this account, the Dreyfus Affair was a means for actively changing the state France found itself in at that time. The Dreyfus Affair meets the criteria of a myth : a dramatic anthropomorphic tale that has a sacred overtone and goes beyond the facts of the time toward an archetype of certain characteristics, in this case, victimization, manipulation, revenge, hate. Ernst Cassirer taught that the question of mythic terminology is irrelevant : the myth is beyond refutation or verification ; it does not explain facts, it supports them.

If, according to Sorel, utopias are important to the intellectuals for the intellectualization of politics, then once it is incapacitated, rendered impotent, myths become important to Sorel, « the anti-intellectual intellectual », for the mystification of political action.

The Dreyfusard revolution was the revolution of the intellectuals against the Republic and their opponents, the church and the army. Sorel believed the aim of the counter-revolution was to combine the mystic and political and thereby establish a myth that would hasten a heroic civilization. This spiritualization of politics which Sorel helped father — was one of the inspirations of the burgeoning fascist movement and ultimately defined its basic character.

43 Ibid., p. 28.

44 Ibid., p. 35.

45 Ibid., p. 5.

46 Sorel, *Réflexions sur la violence*, Paris 1908, p. 46, 180.